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Searching for Blackness: #BlackGirlPilates and Racialized Hashtags as Agentic Praxis on TikTok

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ABSTRACT This paper explores how Black women on TikTok activate platform affordances to make themselves visible within the search engine. Specifically, we offer #BlackGirlPilates as a case study, given the increased interest following socialite Lori Harvey's endorsement of the exercise at the 2022 Met Gala. Both Pilates and Western Technoculture have been studied in regards to its centrality of whiteness as normative. Thus, we conduct a comparative analysis of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates in TikTok's search engine to see how the addition of a racial qualifier changes results. Our analysis reveals that the "anonymous" user within a search for content on Pilates is white, demonstrating that the use of racial qualifiers in hashtags intentionally marks visibility around racial identity. We argue that Black women's use of hashtags in this way is an agentic praxis and form of digital Black feminism wherein they can circumvent white perspectives to create culturally relevant results within the platform. #BlackGirlPilates constructs a community that centers and supports Black women's experience and expertise.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, TikTok, discourse, hashtags, search engine

> We all learned how to teach white bodies, because that's all we saw. And so, we expect in Pilates that everybody is going to look like that white body that we've seen in our certification programs. And it's not true at all. It's important that it's acknowledged . . . and that every time we're looking at anybody, we're always seeing a white body . . . because whiteness, it's the default.
>
> —Sonja Herbert, founder of Black Girl Pilates[1]

> Black women's unique experience with oppression and resistance shapes their ability to understand and utilize communication technologies, both analog and digital.
>
> —Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*[2]

Hundreds of celebrities and philanthropists descended on the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the 2022 Met Gala charity event held annually on the first Monday of May. Attendees walked the red carpet, posing for and addressing clamoring photographers and journalists, including socialite Lori Harvey, who wore a halter style black gown with two large swaths of fabric draped over her shoulders and down her back.[3] Though simple, the gown's cutout put her abs on full display, catching the attention of a journalist who asked what the "trick" to achieving them was. Harvey responded, "It's Pilates. Pilates, it changed my life."[4] A clip of this interaction went viral on TikTok, with nearly 600,000 likes and over 4.5 million views.[5] Soon after, hundreds of videos were made in response to her endorsement of the exercise, with users posting about their desire to achieve Harvey's athletic figure and discover more about Pilates. However, we noticed that Black women on our "For You" feed were raising a fundamental problem: a majority of the users posting about Pilates were thin, middle-class white women. This led us to ask, how were Black women finding content about Pilates that was representative of their racial identity? What possible interventions, if any, were they making in social media content to centralize themselves?

In the months after the Met Gala event, reports began to circulate about the increased use of TikTok as a search engine over legacy company Google.[6] This was later substantiated when a survey revealed that over two in five people in the United States have used the platform as a search engine, especially amongst younger generations.[7] Another report similarly found that using TikTok as a search engine was prevalent among Gen Z women, with a little over half choosing TikTok over Google to search.[8] The study claimed that users turn to TikTok to search for numerous things and cited numerous reasons to use TikTok over a traditional search engine, including the digestible short video formatting, the emphasis on

storytelling, and the personalization of content. The research concludes that while information may not be based on authority, the individualized feel of the platform offers the perspective of others who share their personal experience and skill, fostering a sense of agency and community for users.[9] This shift, though at a relatively early stage, is significant given that "googling" has long been synonymous with online search—the company becoming a verb in and of itself.[10]

This article considers how Black women strategically use TikTok to search for information about Pilates, specifically content that centralizes their expertise and experience. To address this question, we conducted an experiment within TikTok's search engine feature. How would search results vary between "Pilates" and "Black Girl Pilates"? How does this difference match the hegemonic whiteness of fitness and technology? Practitioners and scholars have voiced their frustration with the exclusivity of the Pilates industry, lamenting that it centralizes white bodies. Similarly, there is a breadth of scholarship on the whiteness of Western technoculture and how race is encoded into digital technologies—search engines being one of them. Would the comparative results follow similar patterns?

In the following section, we provide an overview of literature on the whiteness of both pilates and technoculture. We then explore scholarship around hashtags which filters online content, an affordance crucial for our method—a qualitative comparative analysis of TikTok search results situated in Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA).[11] CTDA is a multimodal analytical tool that enables technical artifacts and mechanisms with critical theory and analysis. Our findings reveal the default user within the search for #pilates as white and for #BlackGirlPilates as Black, echoing the previously mentioned concerns of Black women users when Pilates started trending on TikTok. In our discussion we frame #BlackGirlPilates as a *racialized hashtag* and agentic praxis that combines the ability to organize online content with a performance of racial identity. Racialized hashtags are operationalized by Black women to circumvent white perspectives on products and services and create culturally relevant results within the TikTok

search engine. Black women's use of #BlackGirlPilates targets a specific racial and gendered community, demonstrating the skillful deployment of platform affordances to construct content that is useful for other Black women and girls.

The Whiteness of Pilates

German-born physical trainer Joseph Pilates (1883–1967) developed his eponymous fitness method, which focused on developing bodily strength and stability, throughout the twentieth century. Pilates suffered from several ailments as a child and overcame them through a healthy lifestyle and bodybuilding.[12] During World War I, Pilates was detained at an internment camp on the Isle of Mann, England, and began teaching physical fitness classes to others, specifically those in need of rehabilitation from injury and sickness. Given his history of sickness as a child, he prioritized stretching and toning parts of the body with low-impact exercises that differently-abled individuals could perform.[13] Upon his release, Pilates continued to develop and teach his fitness system, and the method grew as he migrated to the United States in the 1920s, particularly within the dance community of New York City. Pilates has since evolved with many practitioners using the same exercises and apparatuses that Joseph Pilates created. The industry, however, has grown to be fairly exclusive along the lines of race and class.

Sonja R. Price Herbert notes the lack of racial diversity within Pilates as the reason for her creation of Black Girl Pilates (BGP), a collective of Black-identifying women who teach the practice.[14] Herbert recounts the overwhelming amount of white instructors, studio owners, and upper-level managers—a trend befitting the fitness industry broadly. Two similar organizations which precede BGP and have overlapping goals of offering Black women agency and opportunities of resistance within fitness cultures are Black Girls Run! and Black Girl Yoga. Black Girls Run! (BGR) is a recreational running organization for Black women that

emerged in 2009 through a blog and has since expanded to more than 250,000 members belonging to 72 chapters across the US.[15] With running being a disproportionately white and middle-class activity, BGR supports and caters to Black women runners. In a similar vein, Black Girl Yoga (BGY), an Instagram account created in 2013, is representative of a counter space to encourage Black yoginis to engage with the practice and resist mainstream narratives that normalize skinny, white, female bodies in yoga spaces.[16] Herbert started Black Girl Pilates in 2017 to combat similar issues of exclusivity, centralize Black women's experiences, and work to make the practice more financially accessible to communities.[17]

Black Girl Pilates aims to offer mentorship and support for Black women teaching Pilates, but also serves as a reminder of Black women's often forgotten place in its history—namely the impact of Kathy Standford Grant.[18] Grant (1921–2010) was a Black woman born in Boston, Massachusetts, who worked as a dancer in New York City. After having knee surgery in 1954, Grant was referred to Joseph Pilates for rehabilitation. In the years after, she would continue to study with him and teach classes. A decade later, Grant became the first woman certified in Contrology (Pilates) from the New York State Vocational Rehabilitation Program, and one of the two instructors to have been under Joseph Pilates's direct tutelage.[19] Grant was a first-generation pioneer of the practice who ushered in a second generation of instructors and students, shaping an industry that would ultimately grow to exclude Black women practitioners.

And this hostility may not solely be an issue of representation and hiring practices, but intrinsic to the very science of Pilates. Sarah W. Holmes argues that Pilates is a "socially constituted and historically specific movement culture" that is racially coded.[20] Her analysis offers the geopolitical context of Joseph Pilates's upbringing, the influence of American dance culture, and foundational exercises that train the body in ways that adhere to white and Euro-American aesthetics. Firstly, Holmes argues that the elements of Pilates's biography outlined earlier are

further animated by ideas around German masculine corporeality—idealizing well-defined muscles and an elongated and slender physique. This ideal Anglo-Saxon male body embodied ideas about Germany's moral, social, and political superiority. With these origins, Holmes contends that "the Pilates education manuals continue to present the white Pilates (and balletic) female body as universal, and neglect that the practice and its values surrounding corporeality are particular to a set of historical circumstances and cultural beliefs."[21] In the first epigraph of this text, Herbert expresses a similar sentiment regarding learning to teach Pilates only through white bodies, demonstrating how ingrained these racial ideologies are to the practice.

Secondly, Holmes argues that while the spine and core are privileged as areas of focus in Pilates, the pelvis is a point of control and stabilization. Movement of the pelvis, butt, and hips engender racial stereotypes regarding the sexuality of Black and Latina women and other cultural taboos that again reproduce ideas about Euro-American superiority. Following Richard Dyer's articulation of the simultaneous power and invisibility of whiteness as the social "norm," the controlled pelvis and upright spine/core of the ideal Pilates body reflects the privileging of white bodies through movement.[22] Directions given to students about the positioning of their bodies are laden with larger ideological discourses and histories. The implications of these practices regulate bodies in ways that prefer "whiteness" and again reinforce white racial hegemony. These racial markings are buried and internalized in the kinesthetic methods of Pilates, and masked in what Holmes describes as a "veneer of neutrality."[23] Holmes's examination of whiteness and anti-Blackness in Pilates sets up a more insidious racial dynamic which collectives like Black Girl Pilates respond to and which are foundational for our study. Similar notions of race and its implications have been explored in regards to technology—an element also relevant to this paper. In the next section, we review literature on the (in)visibility of race within technoculture which mirrors the centrality of whiteness within Pilates.

The Whiteness of Technoculture

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contended with the relationship between race and technology, and part of that research is concerned with how race is central to the structure and function of the internet.[24] André Brock maintains that technoculture—"the relations between, and politics of, culture and technology"—is embedded in white racial ideology which then underwrites beliefs about technology.[25] Brock builds upon elements of Joel Dinerstein's matrix of technoculture which he argues "evoke libidinal tensions that influence how technology is understood in the west."[26] Whiteness represents the universal technological subject, further privileged by anti-Blackness—incorporated by Brock as the seventh node of Dinerstein's matrix. Brock's seventh node echoes the work of Dyer on the prevalence of whiteness as the social norm. The ubiquity of whiteness embeds particular values and narratives into technology, which is simultaneously lauded as neutral and efficient. In her work, Ruha Benjamin similarly argues that technology can even be used to amplify hierarchies and deepen discrimination behind the veneer of benevolence.[27] Given this, anti-Blackness is not a glitch in the system, but emblematic of its racial encoding.

Conceptualizing what she calls "algorithmic oppression," Safiya Noble examines the structural reproduction of racism and sexism within Google's search engine.[28] Web search engines are information retrieval systems developed in the 1990s to index and aggregate information on the internet based on query terms.[29] As expressed in our introduction, Google's search engine grew in popularity due in part to the PageRank algorithm which arranged results based on their linkage to other web pages—a demonstration of their "importance." This designation of value became problematic when Noble revealed that her Google search for "Black girls" included pornography in the results. Noble argues that these derogatory representations are understood as objective and credible because of their visibility at the top of the results.[30] The social, political, and historical implications of Google's search engine can go unquestioned and reify anti-Black and

misogynistic sentiments—latching onto white racial hegemony. Hidden is the capitalist imperative that privileges corporations that purchase visibility in the search results and inform what is legitimated as popular on the internet.

TikTok has also dealt with accusations of censorship and algorithmic bias, with Black users in the US even staging various strikes to bring awareness to the issue of being suppressed.[31] TikTok's censorship and Google's racist search results highlight the relevance of western technoculture as a framework to understand how identity and discrimination can be foundational to the structure and culture of the internet, as well as shaping the experience of users. In this study, #BlackGirlPilates is agentic precisely because it operates against and within this context in which their experience and identity is marginal. We suggest that the use of racialized hashtags allow Black women to carve out and name a space for themselves—taking back control of online content about them rather than relying on racist and sexist narratives that may exist on the internet. And these practices are made possible through digital Black feminism.

Catherine Knight Steele positions digital Black feminism as a framework that centralizes Black women's historical and continuous relationship with technology *first*, rather than seeing it in relation to or secondary to either racism or misogyny. Starting with Black feminist technoculture opens up a breadth of possibilities for studying technology and avoids deficit-based approaches often taken when studying Black Americans. This is complementary to a broader perspective of Black Feminism which is anchored in what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "Black feminist epistemology."[32] Through her analysis of the Black feminist blogosphere, Steele charts five principles that are foundational for digital Black feminist rhetoric. These include prioritizing individual agency, reclaiming the right to self-define, centralizing gender non-binary advocacy, a willingness to create complicated allegiances, and maintaining a dialectic of self and community needs.

Steele also introduces the metaphor of the "virtual beauty shop" to "reinforce the importance of Black women's enclave spaces, or separate spaces constructed for and by Black women, in which we no longer treat Black women's use and manipulation of digital technologies as deviant, deficient, or an aberration."[33] For Steele, material and virtual beauty shops display Black women's ingenuity through hair care technologies (i.e., intricate braiding patterns and hair decorations), their entrepreneurship and building clientele (i.e., establishing a culture of self-help through beauty salons), and Black feminist communication strategies (i.e., shoptalk or Black feminist personal ways of knowing, validation of emotions, or personal accountability). Black women's beauty shops, which were small, often in their homes, and responsible to a loyal clientele "paved the way for lifestyle entrepreneurs and the near ubiquity of today's online influencer culture."[34] We follow Steele's call to centralize Black women's use of and experience with technology, otherwise known as the affordances of technology.

Hashtags as Platform Affordance

Ian Hutchby argues that the study of technologies and social life should involve the examination of affordances, which he describes as "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object."[35] In turn, these technological artifacts are shaped and evolve through how they are acted upon and with. Jenny L. Davis suggests that affordances operate as a combination of mechanisms (requesting/demanding, encouraging/discouraging, or refusing/allowing) and conditions (users' perceptions, dexterity, and cultural or institutional legitimacy) in framing human-technology relations.[36] Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond further extend affordance theory to social media platforms in particular and argue that affordances are the features that produce the actions of different stakeholders such as advertisers, end-users, and developers.[37] These may include liking, commenting, friending, sharing, or posting, and are represented by various

buttons and icons of different shapes and sizes. The affordances of platforms construct their unique version of online sociality available to users who adopt or reject them for their own purposes.[38]

Hashtags have specifically been studied in relation to what they afford internet users, especially on social media. Broadly, social tagging emerged as a Web 2.0 tool to organize online resources.[39] There numerous types, including context-based tags (describing the content of an object or the context in which objects are created), attribute tags (inherent to an object's characteristics), subjective tags (expressing a users' opinion), and organizational tags (identifying personal information).[40] The term "hashtag" was initially used to describe tagging on Twitter (now called X)—due to the use of the "#" symbol (also called the pound sign, number sign, or hash mark).[41] Hashtags are now commonly used across social media, but may vary in implication depending on the platform.[42] The customizable and technology-enabled nature of hashtags allow users to access and process information circulating on social media. Devendra Potnis and Iman Tahamtan found that hashtags complement popular mechanisms of gatekeeping (the flow of information within communication channels), including the formation of communities (clustering individuals of shared interests), broadcasting information (promoting messages through labels and associated topics), discovering and searching information (operating as anchors to make user-generated knowledge more visible and findable), collecting information (to be used for scraping data on user sentiments on social media), organizing information (devising subcommunities and clarity around topics or keywords), and protecting information (marking anything inaccurate to be later verified).[43] The constant ebb and flow of information online can be controlled as users split into groups based on interest and identity, cutting portions of the internet into personalized slices.[44]

Digital scholars have also studied the expression of racial identity through hashtags, primarily in the context of "Black Twitter," described as a satellite

counterpublic of intentional Black users on Twitter who engage in conversations about Blackness through shared racial politics and cultural commonplaces.[45] André Brock maintains that Black Twitter hides in plain sight and is "discoverable" to a mainstream audience through hashtags.[46] The performance of Black identity is also tied to the hashtag's ability to serve "triple duty as 'signifier,' 'sign,' and 'signified,' marking as it does the concept to be signified, the cultural context within which the tweet should be understood, and the 'call' awaiting a response."[47] Hashtags can be used to display cultural knowledge, typifying the linguistic practice of signifyin', and a larger Black American oral tradition that is recognized and responded to by other Black users.[48]

Sanjay Sharma conceptualizes "Blacktags" as a particular type of hashtag and racialized digital object that is associated with Black Twitter "because the tag itself and/or its associated content appears to connote 'Black' vernacular expression in the form of humour and social commentary."[49] Blacktags are constructed with a specificity and latch onto anti-racist discourse, producing networked subjects who perform identity in "unraced" spaces. This performance of race is made visible to non-Black users through technological features such as trending topics on X that propagate popular or viral content.[50] That they "belong" to Black Twitter highlights dynamics of in-group behavior, interplaying with how hashtags also function as gatekeeping mechanisms. These "conversations" between Black Twitter users happen across time and space, are often ephemeral, and can correspond to other moments in American history, politics, and popular culture. For example, in the wake of the movement for Black Lives (#BlackLivesMatter), #Ferguson represented not only a town in Missouri, but a function to retrieve real-time updates and news in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death by a police officer in 2014.[51] #AskRachel marked an inquiry into and social commentary on the racial identity of Rachel Dolezal, who was infamously "outed" as a white woman lying about her race while working as the president of a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.[52] Additionally, there is #TweetLikeThe1600s, among others, which did not

necessarily migrate from a coinciding event but started online organically for quotidian and short-lived moments of connection.[53]

Across this literature, scholars locate hashtags as a feature that *affords* users various ways to sort and search on social media, shaping their actions and interactions with others. It should also be noted, however, in accordance with Hutchby's description cited earlier, that technology is also shaped by the ways users engage with it, creating a reciprocal relationship. That Twitter (X) initially rejected the idea of hashtags in 2007, and that it became one of the most important features on basically every social media platform, is proof of that.[54] Hashtags are a key affordance in this paper, supporting our argument that Black women's use of hashtags with racial qualifiers as an agentic praxis to combat TikTok's privileging of default white users in the search engine and construct a community that can be found by other Black women. Further, hashtags are central to our methodology which we outline next.

Method: A Comparison of #Pilates vs. #BlackGirlPilates

In order to tease out the relationship between race, pilates, and the search capabilities of TikTok that have framed this paper thus far, we conducted a comparative analysis of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates. This analysis is situated within Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) conceptualized by Brock as a "multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture."[55] CTDA incorporates empirical examinations of the material and cultural properties of technology with critical frameworks animated by queer theory, critical feminism, and postcolonial studies among others. By framing technology as a cultural artifact Brock maintains that a "CTDA analysis examines how actors shape technologies and themselves in response to the technologies they use; these technologies in turn are shaped by those who

design and market them."[56] In this paper, we utilize CTDA as a methodological framework situating TikTok's search engine as a technological artifact that reinforces the whiteness of technoculture and considering how Black women make their racial identity visible in response through the lens of critical race and Black feminist theory.[57]

Our analysis included the first thirty results for #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates on the desktop version of TikTok.[58] Thirty represents an appropriate corpus of videos to be engaged with during a user's search and analyzed closely and critically. We collected metadata and engagement metrics (such as date posted, caption, hashtags, and likes) of all search results and inserted them into a spreadsheet. We also coded for the type of content (i.e. vlog, tutorial, etc.), and the perceived racial and gender identity of users in the videos. All data was manually collected and coded on February 26, 2023. The two primary levels of analysis were the perceived racial and gendered identity of users and the hashtags used across both searches.[59] These levels organize our analysis discussed in the next sections and frame which users are most visible under both hashtags as well as understanding the underlying discourse of each.

A Default User

The majority of search results for #pilates, however, included white women, making them the default user visible in the search for pilates content. Only three included non-white women (Asian and Latina). The one video that included a Black user was comedic in tone wherein a Black male user stitched another video with white women doing pilates.[60] The videos generated in this first search (#pilates) were all related to the topic of Pilates and could be categorized across a range of genres. This includes educational (explaining or correcting form), vlogs (recording a users' experience in a class), testimonials (showing before/after results from doing Pilates), GRWMs or "Get-Ready-With-Me" (a user getting

ready for a class), and workout routines (demonstrating particular exercises). A number of users were instructors who advertised workout packages for purchase through their profile. This distinction made by instructors could mean performing exercises with proper form and technique and then spotlighting a product for purchase later in the video or in a caption. For example, in one caption a user writes,

> There's a lot of clickbait going around this app claiming to be Pilates. Real Pilates is all about form, posture, and alignment. If you want to try a REAL Pilates class check out my virtual studio! Want some personalized pointers on which Pilates class to start with and how many times per week to attend. Send me a message on Instagram! ❤️

This user is speaking against what they see as an "inauthentic" version of Pilates that is circulating on TikTok. By positioning herself as an "expert," she hopes to entice viewers to purchase a class where she is the instructor. Among the videos, there was an appreciation and love for the fitness method and a willingness to share it with others. Some women posted their favorite exercises, doing fitness challenges, or bringing their boyfriends to classes.

Contrastingly, all users under the second search (#BlackGirlPilates) were Black. These videos could be categorized under the same genres as those in the first search. They included testimonials, GRWMs, and vlogs. Although there were Black women instructors posting content, most of the users in these videos were students. As such, many videos recounted users' experiences starting Pilates and attending classes. Some also referenced Lori Harvey in their content, demonstrating the importance of her appearance at the MET Gala mentioned earlier in this paper. For example, one user included the audio of Harvey's interview with their video. Another referenced her in their caption, writing, "Put me in [the] weight room any day but Pilates?! A challenge 😭😔 Blake asked Lori the golden question so here the girlies are." These users share a similar enthusiasm for Pilates and created content to encourage others to stay consistent

in it. White users' overrepresentation in the first search, however, reflects the literature previously reviewed on the ubiquity of whiteness and is demonstrated in the difference of hashtags collected from both searches.

Hashtags with Racial Qualifiers

Many of the hashtags used in videos across both searches were related to Pilates and health and wellness more broadly. These hashtags reflect the content found in the search results—referencing at-home workouts, studio classes, and testimonials about users' results. Looking over these hashtags (see Table 1), one could get a clear idea that the content found in both searches are about the same topic and relatively similar.

Categorical Themes	#Pilates	#BlackGirlPilates
Pilates	#Pilates #PilatesInstructor #PilatesBody #PilatesChallenge #PilatesTikTok #PilatesPrincess #PilatesInspiration #PilatesisHard	#PilatesWorkout #PilatesTikTok #PilatesTeacher #PilatesLovers #PilatesBody #PilatesPrincess #ClassicPilates #PilatesAestheticGirl
At-Home Workouts	#HomeWorkouts #AbWorkout #PilatesAtHome	#Matpilates #PilatesAtHome
Studio Workouts	#ReformerPilates #PilatesStudioIv #hotpilates #Reformer #TfStudio	#HotYoga #ClassPass #Solidcore #ClubPilates #ReformerPilates
Health And Wellness	#GymTok #SelfLove #WeightlossJourney #BeforeAndAfter #FitnessProgress #Wellness #ExerciseHack #WorkoutMotivation	#StrengthTraining #CoreWorkout #Fitness #GutHealth #Workout #SelfCare #FitTok #HealthyLiving #BlackGirlWellness #BlackGirlHealing
Visibility On TikTok	#fyp #viral #trending	#fyp
Celebrities	#BellaHadid #KylieJenner #kourtneykardashian	#LoriHarvey
Location	#Utah	#atlPilates #DallasPilates #HoustonPilates #LosAngeles

		#Dallas #dtx #LondonFitness
Clothing	#lululemon	#lululemon
Other	#duet #BeautyTok	#grwm #grwmroutine #travel #FiveBelow #BallerinaCore #MorningMotivation #MiniVlog

Table 1. Hashtags found in videos across both searches organized by theme

The key difference between the hashtags used across search results was the inclusion of qualifiers, or hashtags that marked content with a users' race as well as their gender. Given the terms used in the second search, racial qualifiers are to be expected, but #BlackGirlPilates was not the only one. For example, while #pilatesprincess was used in a video in both searches, #blackpilatesprincess was only featured in the second, demonstrating the inclusion of an additional qualifier to signal racial identity. The videos included a number of other hashtags that explicitly deployed "Black girl" (see Table 2) demonstrating the use of racial qualifiers to mark identity. The only racial qualifiers visible in the first search were #midsizelatina and #firstgenlatina. All other hashtags in the videos from that search made no mention of race, and while this is illustrative of how race is made visible through qualifiers, we see this as not the *absence* of race, but the *presence* of whiteness as the invisible norm and undercurrent in content found in our search.

Hashtags with Racial Qualifiers
#BlackGirlPilates #BlackGirlProblems #BlackPilatesTeacher #BlackGirlTikTok #BlackGirlMagic #BlackGirlPilatesClub #BlackGirlLuxury #BlackPilates #BlackGirlWellness #BlackTikTok #BlackGirlHealing #BlackGirHealingTok #BlackPilatesPrincess #BlackGirlPilatesPrincess #BlackWomenFollowTrain #BlackGirlFollowParty #BlackGirlTok #BlackGirlFollowTrend #BlackGirlLuxuryLifestyle #BlackGirlFitness #BlackGymGirl

Table 2. Hashtags that included racial qualifiers in the #BlackGirlPilates search

Although the hashtags collected in the first search for #pilates lacked explicit references to race, a majority of the videos included white women. As discussed in the first section of our analysis, this presents white women as the default user, despite the platform's diversity. #Whitegirlpilates is not necessary for white women who are already centralized in content generated about the topic and do not need a racial qualifier to make themselves visible. This point is made more clear given that some videos in the corpus for the first search did not utilize hashtags at all. White women are privileged via the search results—all without the inclusion of hashtags, let alone those with racial qualifiers. This echoes Dyer's sentiment that "white people are not racially seen and named" but remains the universal subject and Brock's additional anti-Black matrix of Western technoculture.[61] Given the construction of whiteness as the invisible norm of content about Pilates on TikTok, the use of #BlackGirlTikTok allows Black women to manufacture their visibility and centralize their experiences. #BlackGirlPilates demonstrates a coupling of platform affordances with the agentic practices of internet users. As a racialized hashtag it is both a context-based and organizational tag that combines an expression of identity (Black girl) and niche interest (Pilates). Because the hashtag indexes content to be retrieved in the search engine, it marks content to be discoverable by others with a similar identity

and interest. This also demonstrates the hashtags gatekeeping mechanisms in forming a community of Black women doing pilates as well as broadcasting to or organizing information for them (through either testimonials or promotions), that can be searched for and collected (as we did for this paper).

#BlackGirlPilates (and the others included in Table 2) functions as a racialized hashtag that combines the ability to filter content with users' desire to perform racial identity online racial. While #BlackGirlPilates is more straight-forward than Blacktags which pull from Black vernacular slang and expressions, it operates as a racialized hashtag that explicitly signals a racial identity—calling out to other Black women and girls and producing a space where they are centralized. This simplicity also points to the hashtag being long-lasting and not for a fleeting trend as is sometimes the case of Black Twitter. On TikTok, racialized hashtags engage with other affordances like the "For You Page" (FYP) algorithm, which constructs personalized content based on user engagement. This means that posting with #BlackGirlPilates can bring similar content to users' feeds without them necessarily searching for it. Given the whiteness of Pilates culture and content without the racial qualifier, deploying racialized hashtags allows Black women to have a role in shaping the content on the platform as they wish and exercise agency to construct a narrative on their own engagement with Pilates.

A Space by and for Black Women

The content constructed around #BlackGirlPilates represents a space where Black women's experience and expertise are prioritized, circumventing white perspectives rather than correcting them. Many of the videos in both searches expressed a love for pilates, with users sharing a new or continued appreciation of the exercise. Few users were preoccupied with lamenting over their marginalization in the practice, though they remain outnumbered as both instructors and students. One of the instances in which this was brought up came

from one user who had two videos retrieved in the search. In one, she recorded herself in a pilates class and includes on-screen text that reads:

> Always being the only Black girl in pilates but they play Hip Hop so you can go extra hard, baby twerk, and rap for an hour while everyone else just flows. I leave feeling recharged 😌.

In the corresponding caption, she writes:

> REPRESENTATION MATTERS! So shoutout to @[solidcore] for their diverse roster of instructors, especially Akilah at their Hollywood Location, because her playlists are 🔥🔥🔥 and y'all don't even know how much that means to me 🥹😩.

This user emphasizes the importance of having Black instructors and the loneliness of being the only Black student.

In the second video in our corpus, the same user replies to a comment left on the first, in which a user with a similar experience notes that instructors will only play Hip Hop music because she is there.[62] In this caption, the original user defends her instructor, who she describes as "heavensent" in on-screen text. That caption read:

> smh, this comment really disappointed me . . . although this instructor does NOT play hip-hop music just for the one or two black students in her class, especially when we are the minorities . . . I am more than grateful that she is herself, and that she plays the music that she actually listens to and that I listen to as well because it does create a safe space for me to work out. It does motivate me to work out. And I see more black students in this class than I have over the other 50+ classes I've taken doing Pilates. We need more instructors like her, and less negativity surrounding inclusivity.

Within this small interaction, the topic of inclusivity within Pilates is discussed. Both users know the experience of being the only Black person in a class, yet one expresses feeling hypervisible and targeted through a sudden switch to Hip Hop music. The other insists that, in her perspective, the Black instructor is playing

music of shared interest between herself and other minority students. This shared culture provides a “safe space” for her to workout and be motivated.

This example demonstrates how the use of #BlackGirlPilates and other racialized hashtags bring Black women’s experiences with Pilates to the forefront, whether it be good (community and social support) or bad (lack of diversity in classes). Though both users disagree on this particular issue they face similar struggles and can sympathize with and relate to each other as a minority in classes. These aspects of content found in this search map onto the impact and utility of other race-focused fitness collectives like Black Girl Pilates or Black Girls Run! which allow Black women to exercise agency in their engagement with fitness culture. Unlike these organizations, the hashtag has no physical presence, such as in-person events or a founder responsible for its creation, but TikTok users can signal affiliation with this ad hoc community through the use of tagging with racial qualifiers—making these hashtags an agentic praxis.

#BlackGirlPilates as Agentic Praxis

Black women have historically demarcated the boundaries for normative codes of femininity due to visual narratives and ideologies that justify their exclusion from an array of spaces in Western culture.[63] Black feminist scholars argue that controlling images such as Mammy and Jezebel, for example, position Black women as unattractive, hypersexual beings, positioning white women as the true example of femininity.[64] Despite this position as Other, Black women have persisted in constructing and prioritizing their own self-epistemology—a key practice of Black feminist thought. Black women have continued to center themselves and their experiences within and against systems of sexism and racism through the intentional construction of separate spaces by and for themselves within industries such as fitness and beauty.[65] To navigate their exclusion, Black women also infuse products with a Black feminist standpoint.

Aria Halliday argues that Black women cultural producers not only create "for the benefit of Black girls, Black women, or Black people writ large, but rather actively struggle with and against popular constructions of Black femininity which cavort with white supremacist images."[66] This process is called "embodied objectification," in which Black women instill products with their names, experiences, and aesthetics in ways that embed Black womanhood within objects of racial play—such as dolls, animation, and memes. In this section, we conceptualize Black women's use of racialized hashtags such as #BlackGirlPilates as an agentic praxis that extends these practices of self-epistemology and allows them to infuse content on TikTok with their expertise and experience about pilates.

Black women's strategic use of racial hashtags during their #pilates search demonstrates how they deploy embodied objectification and digital Black feminism to disrupt the whiteness of pilates in the material and digital space of TikTok. #BlackGirlPilates functions as what Steele calls a "virtual beauty shop," which provides "a lens to see Black women owners, creators, and builders of platforms and a way to discuss the principles, praxes, and products of digital Black feminism."[67] We find it useful to briefly think through the digital Black feminism's principles outlined earlier, primarily the emphasis on agency and self-definition which are particularly relevant in this context. Firstly, digital Black feminism sees individual agency as crucial to liberation from white supremacy and patriarchy. Steele writes that "agency redefines the self as powerful and skillful within systems of technology and digital culture."[68] The deployment of racialized hashtags such as #BlackGirlPilates for indexing and retrieval demonstrates Black women's technical prowess to create an online community that revolves around them.

Secondly, digital Black feminism acknowledges the importance of making "decisions about both self-presentation and identity."[69] The power to name themselves as Black and women through racial qualifiers is an assertion and

performance of identity that distinguishes them as different from others posting pilates content. Through these principles, #Blackgirltiktok reveals how "Black women's unique experience with oppression and resistance shapes their ability to understand and utilize communication technologies, both analog and digital."[70] Further, it's demonstrative of how Black feminist technoculture and the framework of the virtual Black beauty shop has the power to create "safe spaces" for Black women through active exclusion outside of the reach of white supremacy or sexism, using "shop talk" to discuss shared experiences without judgment. The use of racialized hashtags creates a virtual space wherein Black women can be seen, heard, and meet over a shared interest and circumvent Western technoculture's anonymous white user.

The previously mentioned examples of Black women's fitness communities—Black Girl Pilates, Black Girls Run!, and Black Girl Yoga—illustrate that Black women carve out both material and virtual spaces for themselves in the culture and industry of fitness. While these organizations and collectives exist in the real world, they are also housed on digital platforms that allow them to exercise agency in the construction of an online community in their own image. These examples also support our discussion around Black women's use of #BlackGirlPilates, which we see as a product of embodied objectification and Black feminist technoculture to decenter the normative white user that platforms privilege while also injecting joy and pleasure into TikTok from a Black feminist experience. Black women's entrepreneurship and communication strategies are key practices in addressing the lack of representation within pilates content and TikTok search engine results writ large.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have offered a comparison of #pilates and #BlackGirlPilates to discuss the whiteness of search results and the strategic use of racialized

hashtags as an agentic praxis through which Black women center themselves. For any end-user looking for content about Pilates, the default user being white may not be questioned because of an assumption that the search engine is presenting objective information. Thus, white women's experiences are front and center in the search for content about Pilates. Whiteness is presented as a universal "norm" though read through individual users. Additionally, as Brock argues, this visibility is facilitated by technology, demonstrating how whiteness is a belief system of Western technoculture and one of "the libidinal energies that power our modern institutions, technologies, and infrastructure" and how platforms can empower some bodies and experiences over others.[71]

Due to the culture of Pilates, white women's experience with the practice is different than other demographics, being privileged as the body type that is encoded into training material and exercises. On the other hand, Black women often contend with being the only student and instructor or other feelings of isolation within Pilates. The use of racial qualifiers in their content calls out to other Black women in ways that intentionally craft a place where they can find support from those who look like them and have similar experiences. Black women use #BlackGirlPilates as a form of embodied objectification to label content and circumvent the whiteness of #Pilates on TikTok and in the material world. Beyond the technical affordances, #BlackGirlPilates has a cultural significance as an agentic praxis, because it constructs a virtual space for Black women. Though they may be alone in studios, they are not alone when searching #BlackGirlPilates and seeing that there are many other Black women with something in common. We also find the use of racialized hashtags an exercise of agency and self-definition, two principles of digital Black feminism. Black women deploy hashtags for their unique purposes, showcasing how platform affordances structure forms of agency, despite simultaneously causing harm—i.e. the need for a qualifier in the first place.

This case study demonstrates the continued legacy of Black women centering themselves within digital culture, and illuminates how our relationship with technology "provides the most generative means of studying the possibilities and constraints" of our digital society.[72] What remains are some lingering contentions which can provide the ground for future research. While TikTok's search engine allows for the generation of videos with racialized hashtags, end-users may not search with them, meaning they do not contribute to a degree of visibility most relevant for content creators seeking to monetize content. Since many users across searches were Pilates instructors, we are left to wonder whether the use of racial qualifiers to find and target Black women translates to an in-person clientele. Additionally, given TikTok's monetization model, visibility in the search engine can correlate to engagement metrics, meaning that white users are also privileged by virtue of being higher up in the generated results. Further research should involve speaking to Black women creators about their experience attempting to monetize content as well as a general inquiry in the deployment of racial qualifiers in hashtags on the platform.

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58. We used the desktop version of TikTok for two reasons. Firstly, the use of a web browser over the mobile app allowed us to avoid signing into a personal account which relies on past engagement to offer results and could skew the results because we interact with Black content in our daily lives. . Secondly, the web browser allowed for a larger screen for manual collection. ↩

59. It is important to note a limitation in scope of the project, which is its focus on the United States. This is a reflection of the localized nature of TikTok’s For You Page, but also fits our critique of Western technoculture and the centralization of white bodies and experiences. Further research could extend this study to other regional contexts for comparison. ↩

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